

Sense and Psychotherapy

Thoughts on Psychotherapy and Living

Fall 1999

Dear Reader,

This newsletter has been a difficult one to write. I have strong feelings about our need for a sense of connectedness both to the world around us and to something transcendent permeating that world, but the subject is so large and unclear that it's difficult to get hold of. I've found myself thinking about everything from religion, to nature, to family and friends, to hobbies, careers and even our daily routines.

I do know I believe that in order to fulfill our potential as human beings, we all need to feel part of something outside of ourselves, something that binds all the disparate parts of our lives and the world around us into a larger whole. Nearly everyone seems to have a different idea of what this "something" is though, and so I think that it probably feels somewhat different for each of us.

I also believe that this "something" often reveals itself in the most mundane, everyday interactions and events. Through these moments, we discover a sense of connection that surpasses what we see with our eyes, hear with our ears, and feel with our hands. Somehow, it becomes something we know in our hearts.

Just the facts...

- More than 90% of Americans report a religious affiliation.
- Studies show a strong correlation between lower blood pressure and participation in spiritual activities.

Connectedness

We lead fast-paced, stimulus-packed, activity-filled lives. We work hard. We play hard. We network. We multitask. Yet, amidst all the energy and commotion, all the interaction, all the facts and data constantly flying at us, a common complaint amongst my clients and friends is that they feel "out of touch". Instead of seeing richness and variety, they feel chaos and overload. Something is missing, something that could resolve some of the chaos, and make sense of things. While I don't believe there's a single "Answer" to this predicament, I do believe that we can achieve a sense of meaningful wholeness in our lives. We can't just jump directly at it though. Instead, I believe that we can get closer to that elusive, transcendent "something" if we focus on very practical ways of enhancing our sense of connectedness to the world around us.

I'm constantly learning of new ways people have been able to achieve this sense of practical connection, but I think I'm more often struck by how so many of us find it in similar sorts of ways. Religious community can provide us with a personal connection to others following a similar path. Political and social causes can offer a sense of satisfaction through working jointly toward a common goal. Loyalty toward, and identification with, a school, a job, or even a group of fellow hobbyists can offer a shared space where we experience a sense of common interest. Even normal, simple activities like walking the dog or cleaning the yard can provide us with the opportunity to connect with ourselves and our surroundings.

Fortunately, the same jumble of relationships and activities that leaves us overwhelmed can be the key to our "salvation". It's a matter of what kind of meaning we attach to them. Many of us get caught up in the numbers game, how many friends, how many parties, how many hobbies, without ever getting truly involved in anything. Yet, without that involvement, there's no real personal connection, and without that feeling of connection we never get the sense that our lives are anything more than a mixed bag of bits and pieces. The real challenge is to find the relationships and activities that have personal meaning for us. It's through the truly meaningful connections we make to the world around us that we can achieve that sense of something larger than ourselves.

One of the beauties of all these different forms of connection is how they build on and support one another. Our lives are a web of connections of varying strengths and lengths, continually forming and reforming over time. Often, I find that it's not so much a matter of people finding new relationships and activities as reexamining their current ones and discovering them anew. I feel that a large part of my role as a therapist is to help my clients undertake this journey. Along the way we try to determine which links are worth nurturing, and which are better left behind. They're often pleasantly surprised to find a richness and clarity permeating even the most routine corners of their lives. Even if they never end up discovering "The Answer", the process of connecting, or reconnecting, to the world around them can be a revelation in itself.

“Momma, what does God look like?”

As my son has grown more aware of, and more curious about, the world around him, his questions have acquired a naive complexity that has led us to some very interesting discussions about the nature of religious beliefs and spirituality. While I'm surprised and pleased by his inquisitiveness, and curious about where the questions come from, I'm also quite often left searching for answers.

Sometimes, just when I think I have a nice simple reply to satisfy his six-year-old curiosity, I find us travelling down paths I have no clue how to navigate. I find myself fumbling, searching for explanations to issues I haven't thought about for years, and may never have been clear about in the first place. I often ponder our discussions for a long time afterwards, not just hoping I gave him satisfying answers, but re-examining the questions myself.

His queries often renew my own struggles with religion and spirituality. At times I long for a simple, straightforward “answer”. I imagine how much easier Life would be if I possessed a set of undeniable truths. As a child I was raised to believe in a particular faith, and it supplied me with a set of answers which satisfied me at the time. Yet, during my adolescence, I began to have doubts, and I've never been able to regain that sense of childlike clarity. At this point, I'm not sure that I ever will.

When I look around at the different religions in the world, I tend to focus more on their similarities than their differences. At their common core, I see a deep, all-encompassing belief in a higher power, a larger than life truth. Hand in hand with instructions on how believers are to worship their deity(ies), are teachings on how to treat others. Although they may word it differently, most religions seem to celebrate love, respect, and some variation on the Golden Rule.

I've been forced to look deep inside myself for what is true to me. What are my core beliefs? What do I want to pass on to my son? I know that I want him to have the freedom to form his own beliefs, to pursue his own spiritual path, and to have respect and tolerance for those whose beliefs differ from his own. I can honestly tell him I don't know what God looks like, what he eats, or even if God is a HE. I will encourage him to read, to question, to struggle with the paradoxes, and to remain open to new ways of examining his own faith and respecting those of the people around him.

I think that what I need to do with my son is not just acknowledge that I don't have all the answers for him, but also accept that it's ok, and even spiritually enriching, to wrestle with issues of this sort. What we learn about ourselves and the world around us as we ask these questions is an important part of the journey. When I think about it this way, I feel excitement and anticipation, rather than dread, at the next set of questions he'll come up with.

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*Age does not protect you from love.
But love, to some extent, protects you from age.*

Jeanne Moreau